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->From the Editor’s Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"

Well, we’ve gone from winter to spring, back to winter in a matter of just a few days!! Mix in some torrential rains, some sun, more rain, and then some snow! Wow, it can only be weather in New England!

Speaking of strange events, the healthcare bill passed this past week. Plenty of partisan politics, and a real disgusting display, at that. I’m not overly happy with the passage of this bill, but I do see some good things in it. And yes, some bad. But, I’m not going to delve into it all because I have a feeling that this is not a "done deal" just yet! And, if I know Joe, he’s going to have some comments about this issue in his column. He’ll do a good job of commentary, I’m sure!

So, I’m going to try and get some rest after a long and tiring week. It doesn’t get any easier as you get older, I guess! So, sit back, relax, and let’s get right to it!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone and again there aren’t any good messages in the NewsGroup.

But there’s enough going on out there that we can talk about other things. For one, the President’s health care bill has passed.

I guess that calling it "the President’s health care bill" is a bit misleading though, since it’s not the bill that he’d wanted, really. It IS a start, and I’m glad that the miscellaneous stuff like the "free ride" for a couple of states has been cut out, but what we really need IS a public option. Without that, there’s no incentive for the insurance companies to treat us any better than they have been. You can legislate that they can’t drop people for getting sick or that they have to cover

pre-existing conditions, but they'll find some other way to extract what they feel is their due. I don't know about you, but I don't see any reason to trust them to suddenly become "the good guys".

My take on this new law is that the best way for us to benefit from it is to buy stock in the insurance companies. I mean, the biggest provision in the whole thing is to mandate that everyone must have health insurance. As far as I'm concerned, that is just guaranteeing the insurance companies more than 30 million new 'conscripted' customers... people like you and me with no choice but to pay these companies what they want because the law says we must.

Some people have responded to that idea by pointing to Social Security and Medicare. But it's not a relevant comparison because both Social Security and Medicare are government plans. And yes, they operate at a loss. Government shouldn't be a for-profit enterprise... ever. The government's sole purpose should be to protect and support its citizens. It's true that we all pay into Social Security (except for some teachers), and Medicare, and that they are... entitlements. The up-side of these systems is that they are not for-profit ventures that seek to make money or make their stock offerings more attractive to investors.

Yes, there is much money spent each year trying to weed out cheats and swindlers; those who seek to profit from the system when they shouldn't. Unfortunately, there is so much emphasis put on "catching the crooks" that people who are actually deserving of the benefits of these programs are denied. I have a friend who is disabled and unable to work, and had to wait for more than three years just for a hearing to determine her eligibility. Now think about that. Someone who is disabled and unable to earn a living, someone who has paid into the system and is eligible for benefits having to wait for three years just to claim what is rightfully hers. She was able to 'hang on' and 'hang in there' for the amount of time it took, but just barely.

And once she actually got the hearing, it was in another state, requiring a long drive and an over-night stay. During the hearing, her lawyer presented "the evidence"... three tests which showed that she was indeed disabled by the applicable guidelines. The doctor 'testifying' on behalf of the Social Security Administration took the stance that she was NOT eligible because there was a discrepancy in the reports... one of the administering doctors termed her as "disabled" instead of "profoundly disabled", as the other two had. Excuse me??

The remedy for this, in the judge's eyes, was to have the test done again. Now the problem here is multi-faceted.

First of all, the test is painful. They basically pass electric current through your limbs and determine the amount of damage by how much pain you can stand. There is no permanent damage, but the pain is said to be intense.

Second, the test had to be administered by a doctor of the government's choosing. It just so happened that HER doctor was 'approved' by the government, but since she was already his patient, they couldn't use him. The next choice, because the proceedings took place in another state, was a doctor far enough away that it also required a long drive (something detrimental to her condition), and an overnight stay. Of course, the SSA was not about to provide lodging or travel expenses for it.

She did, after having this painful test done for a FOURTH time, receive

her approval from Social Security and is now receiving her disability checks. But should anyone have to go through all of that when their need is legitimate? Unfortunately, this is what happens when the focus is on the cheats and crooks rather than those that are in genuine need. It’s what happens when politicians use things like one doctor double-billing the government or a couple of individuals getting disability when they shouldn’t. How many deserving people are left twisting in the wind while they ’decide’ who should be allowed to collect their due? I don’t know. Oddly enough, the government doesn’t seem to keep records on that.

So why am I mentioning this ’flaw’ in a government program when I’m rallying FOR a government program? Because it shows that we must always keep our focus on what’s important. What’s important is supporting the people who need it as the program was meant to support them.

If we simply mandate that everyone must have insurance, we are doing no more than leading legions of sheep to a figurative slaughter. Insurance companies will have no incentive to not "use" them as sources of profit, rather than as clients who require support.

Thomas Jefferson believed that there were certain inalienable rights. In other words, rights that were not within any government’s purview to disallow. They were things that every individual should have by virtue of simply being an individual. And yes, he did also say that these rights should not and could not come at the cost of another individual’s rights.

So is health care an inalienable right? No, I don’t think so. It should be a privilege. But a privilege by virtue of having paid into the system and having a genuine need for the benefits it offers. It should be a covenant between an individual and his or her government that they will be taken care of if the need arises.

And yes, we need to find a way to pay for it. Health care has changed. Medical care is much more involved than it used to be. There was a time when we simply didn’t have the tools to ’fix’ things that we do now. Yes, these tools cost money, and the technology involved can be costly. And while we bemoan the expense, none of us would willingly go back to the days with no treatments for things we take for granted today. So we are left with trying to find a way to pay for it all.

The problem that is not being addressed is the ’corporate mentality’ or, more accurately, the "Wall Street mentality"... the idea that we are ’entitled’ to make a huge profit or that a company’s stock offering must be ever-increasing in order for it to survive. It used to be that a company did well if they provided a good product or service at a good price. These days, it’s more important that the stock value keep going up and the ’shortcut’ to that is to have fewer, lower-paid people providing lesser-valued goods and services for more money. And those who engineer this system are the ones that profit at the cost of all else.

I’ll say again what I’ve said many times before: We have the best health care available anywhere. Nowhere else will you find the combination of skill, technology and accessibility that our health care system provides, and I’m proud of that. What we need is a better way to manage paying for it. In my opinion, this means that everyone involved... from the CEOs of major corporations that provide the equipment and medicines, to insurance companies, to medical facilities and doctors, and to all of us as individuals... is going to have to make some changes, and the government can be and should be at the forefront of it all.

Companies that manufacture the equipment and medicines should be focused on providing more of their product at a realistic price and adhere to the 'selling more at a better value' paradigm, insurance companies should be tasked with providing good coverage for a good price, medical establishments and doctors should not have to worry about making ends meet, but neither should they be able to accrue huge profits simply by virtue of the fact that patients... their customers... have no other choice.

And, perhaps most important of all, we as individuals are going to have to learn to do without some things. Things like having insurance pay for every little prescription or every 'wellness' visit to the doctor's office. Yes there are cases where someone will NEED assistance with these things, and it should be provided. But by and large, we need to take responsibility for ourselves.. all of us, individuals, care providers and those who make all the wonderful things our technology provides us, and the insurance companies too.

And there is one group that I have not mentioned in this column up until now.... our legislators. This health care bill (now law) could have been so much better than it is... and I believe that it will be... but with the partisan wrangling that we've been seeing this past year... heck, since the 90's when the Clintons tried reforming health care... has lessened not only the law and the possibilities for a better system, but all of us too as individuals and as members of this society. While I'm not prepared to say that conservatives have no valid concerns, I AM prepared to say that they have done a very poor job of providing alternative options. And the descent into what can only be called fear mongering is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. They have spent most of the past several years, even before the election, scratching at the fears of 'average' Americans with things like "socialism" and "death panels". Even once it's clear that this is not socialism, that there are and will be no death panels, the average American is left with nothing but the 'bad' feeling. And it is my belief that THAT is exactly what the perpetrators intended in the first place, since they can then crow that the "majority of the American people are against this" when, in fact, it is they who are the cause of this misplaced fear. And, interestingly enough, the numbers shifted once again when the bill passed, but there are still those like certain members of my family who say foolish things like "I don't like the idea of a government plan! The government never does ANYTHING right... and besides, I don't want them screwing up my Social Security and Medicare!"

Sometimes I wonder if people actually listen to what they say.

So now that the bill has passed and has been signed into law, what is left to us now, and will be much harder to do after the fact, is to make it a better law. I'm not enough of a liberal to believe that drug companies should give away drugs, or that doctors should be able to qualify for financial aid, but there needs to be a middle ground, and a middle ground where all benefit. We need a public option. We need a... recourse for those who cannot afford the price that insurance companies want to charge. Having an insurance option available that covers major expenses, the kind of catastrophic or drawn-out and involved care that we all fear; cancer treatment, heart surgery, hip replacement, etc... in fact, all the big stuff... without all the little comforting niceties... wellness visits, prescription co-pay, etc. Yeah, it won't be a dream policy, but neither will it leave someone dangling at the end of a medical bill.

And for those who cannot afford to pay ten dollars for an aspirin (yeah, the Lethal Weapon movie), those who cannot afford the

latest and greatest antibiotic, those who need drugs just to live, we need a way for them to get what they need. Let’s face it, the drug companies can lower prices to a large extent. Not only do they do it in third-world countries, they do it in Canada. And the fact that you can get free antibiotics and a 90 day supply of about 300 different drugs for $10. Granted, they’re not the "top shelf" drugs, and you’ll never find the latest chemo drug on the list, but they are available.

Now, the drug companies may well be providing these drugs at cost to pharmacies like those in Walmart and your local grocery store as a marketing ’gimmick’, but they ARE providing them. And I’m sure that the insurance companies don’t have a problem with with any of this, since they are still collecting premiums from their ’customers’ and not having to pay anything out since the co-pay for most policies is more than $10. They get to collect the money and not have to pay anything out. So that tends to be a good deal for almost everyone... the consumer pays no more than what they would have if their prescription was a higher price, the pharmacy gets you into their store in the hopes of you having all your other prescriptions filled there, and the drug company gets to sell a lot of pills. So why can’t we do that with a lot more drugs? Does it have to be $10 for a 90-day supply? Would a 30-day supply for $10 be horrible for some drugs, especially if they used to cost three or four times that?

I’m not saying that there is no circumstance where a drug needs to be hellishly expensive. There are drugs are hard to manufacture, or take massive amounts of time to design, create, produce and store, and the testing that must be done... it boggles the mind. But that is what my grandfather used to call "CODB"... the cost of doing business. You pays your money, you takes your chance. If it were any other type of business, no one would put up with the kind of costs drug companies charge. I don’t even remember the rationale drug companies use for defending their selling of the same drugs for much lower prices in other countries, but it didn’t strike me as valid when I heard it. What they need is, just like the insurance industry, a reminder that their end product is their goods or services, not their stock offerings.

Well, we’ve covered a lot of ground here, and I don’t expect anyone to agree with everything I’ve said, but I hope some people think about some of the things I’ve said.

So think about it, and c’mon back next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Nintendo 3D-Capable DS!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Spaghetti Westerns?!
  Kingdom Hearts III!

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Nintendo To Launch 3D-Capable DS in 2010/11

Nintendo Co plans to launch a new model of its DS handheld game console that allows users to play three-dimensional (3D) games without using special glasses, aiming to reinvigorate demand for the five year old machine.

The Japanese company said the new portable player, tentatively named "Nintendo 3DS," will be able to play titles created for previous DS models and will be launched in the financial year starting in April.

Nintendo, which competes with Sony Corp and Microsoft Corp

in video games, declined to give details such as price and launch dates, but said more information will be announced at the E3 video game trade show in Los Angeles in June.

"This will certainly stimulate demand for the DS," Rakuten Securities analyst Yasuo Imanaka said.

"But, we need to keep in mind that this is a portable machine. If you expect the kind of full-blown 3D visuals shown on TVs or in movie theatres, you could be disappointed."

Sony plans to release 3D titles for its PlayStation 3 game console in time for the planned release of its 3D TVs in June. That game console can be upgraded to become 3D-capable using a software update.

Electronics makers and software creators have high hopes that growing interest in 3D movies, sparked by the sci-fi blockbuster "Avatar" and other recent titles, will drive sales of their 3D-capable hardware and software contents.

Nintendo has sold more than 125 million units of the DS worldwide, but the company expects unit sales of the dual-screen machine to fall 4 percent in the year ending March 31, its first ever decline in annual sales.

"Red Steel 2" Videogame An Homage to Spaghetti Westerns

A "Red Steel 2" sword and gunplay videogame hitting the market on Tuesday pays tribute to the nameless hero carved into film legend by director Sergio Leone.

The title capitalizes on enhanced motion-sensing controllers for Nintendo Wii videogame consoles to let players virtually wield samurai swords in battles with vicious thugs who have overrun a fictional desert town.

"In many ways this character and this world is my personal homage to

Sergio Leone," Ubisoft creative director Jason Vandenberghe told AFP while providing an early go at the game in San Francisco. "It is very melodramatic, which I love."

Leone, who died in 1989, was famous for "spaghetti western" genre films starring a young Clint Eastwood as a "man with no name" who outsmarts and outshoots unsavory characters in cowboy towns.

The videogame plays out in a fictional "East meets West" setting in the US state of Nevada. Players take on the role of a banished clan member who returns home to find his town taken over by biker thugs.

The key weapon is a samurai sword realistically wielded by slicing, jabbing and blocking with Wii Motion Plus controllers.

"An impressive fusion of Eastern and Western influences, ’Red Steel 2’ aims to bridge the gap between casual and hardcore players," said Scott Steinberg, head videogame analyst at TechSavvy Global.

"The game should offer a compelling mix of sword/gun-play that gives the player a greater one-to-one connection to what’s happening on-screen and sense of overall empowerment."

"Red Steel 2" is the first swordplay action videogame customized for Plus devices that ramp up the precision of Wii controllers.

"It really makes that much of a difference," Vandenberghe said. "With the Plus it is swing and bam, simultaneous action. You believe it."

Ubisoft jumped early into making games for the Wii, releasing the original "Red Steel" when the consoles debuted in November 2006.

The original title sold 1.4 million copies and Vandenberghe is convinced the improved realism of in-game swordplay will win new fans for the franchise.

"There is something about this kind of game play that activates the Conan brain," Vandenberghe quipped, referring to a barbarian hero from a fiction book series made into a film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"When you hold the Wii-mote and whack; I see again and again that it unleashes the barbarian inside people."

Wii has been criticized for lacking the processing and graphics capabilities to handle action games that can be played on Microsoft Xbox 360 or Sony PlayStation 3 consoles.

"We are bringing a fun action game to the Wii," said Vandenberghe, who guided the creation of ’Red Steel 2’ in the French videogame star’s Paris studio.

"I fundamentally believe that if you make a good game and it is only available on the Wii people will buy it."

Sony last week unveiled a motion-sensing controller that it hopes will boost interest in PlayStation 3 consoles.

PlayStation Move wands will hit the market in time for the year-end holiday shopping season and aim to tap into a zest for motion-sensing controls that made Nintendo Wii consoles marketplace superstars.

Microsoft is getting into the motion-sensing controller game with a Project Natal release slated for later this year.

Natal will let Xbox 360 players control in-game action with pure body motion, eliminating the need for wands or other hand-held gadgets, according to early glimpses at the technology.

Kingdom Hearts III, It’s Unofficially Official

Don’t look for it until well after Final Fantasy Versus XIII ships, but Square Enix design wizard Tetsuya Nomura has confirmed Kingdom Hearts III is unquestionably in queue.

The news broke (courtesy IGN) by way of an interview with Nomura in the Japanese Kingdom Hearts: Birth by Sleep Ultimania Guide (for PSP) in which he references a whopping /three/ new Kingdom Hearts games.

Number one we’ve already mentioned, Kingdom Hearts III. Nomura says development on the latter depends on his current project, Final Fantasy Versus XIII. Since no one knows when that’s going to be finished (much less released) I’d be foolish to even speculate on a timeframe for Donald and Goofy’s next major outing.

Nomura says another title’s due this year (does he mean the US version of Birth by Sleep for the PSP, which won’t ship until this summer?) followed by a third in 2011...or later, depending. Apparently one of these is already in the cooker.

Nomura, who got his start with the company debugging Final Fantasy IV is probably best known for designing the iconic cast of Final Fantasy VII. He’s reprised that role for nearly all the Final Fantasy games (among others) since. He’s currently working on an action-RPG titled Final Fantasy Versus XIII, set in the same universe as Square Enix’s just-released, similarly titled blockbuster.

IGN argues "the biggest news" is that the company has no plans to remake Birth By Sleep for the mainstream consoles (PS3, Xbox 360) along the lines of the Chain of Memories PS2 remake of the Game Boy Advance original. I’m not sure what’s really newsworthy there. Porting from a low-end handheld to a high-end console makes sense, but since the PSP ’s already a /high-end/ handheld, I’m not sure what the point of slapping a layer of gloss on a PS3 or Xbox 360 version would offer, considering the exponential development costs incurred in the transition.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Chinese Media Chastise Google Over Threat To Leave

China’s state-controlled media intensified criticism of Google on Monday, accusing the U.S. company of playing politics by threatening to shut down its China-based search engine.

Chinese news reports say Google Inc. is on the verge of making good on a threat to shutter its China site, Google.cn, because Beijing forces the Internet giant to censor search results.

Commentaries carried by Xinhua News Agency, the China Daily newspaper and other state media accused Google of harboring a political agenda and said the company must comply with local laws.

"Business is business. But when it involves political tricks, business will come to an end soon," the China Daily wrote.

Other recent commentaries also have skewered Google while skating over the censorship issue that rankles many Chinese, and the critical tone and timing of the editorial onslaught bore the hallmarks of a coordinated government campaign.

Duncan Clark, managing director of BDA China Ltd., a technology market research firm, said he was told by an official in the Shanghai government that Chinese newspaper editors were ordered last week to get on message. He declined to identify the official.

"The key for the government is to have their line reach the public and to placate the public on this," Clark said. "So that’s what they’re doing with the editorials."

The Internet, while heavily monitored, is the most freewheeling part of China’s tightly regulated media world. Google has said it would shutter the Chinese search engine unless the government allow the company to operate a relatively uncensored search engine - a demand that in essence would mean tearing down the so-called "Great Firewall" that the government uses to keep its citizens from finding politically sensitive information and images.

Since Google announced it was considering the shutdown in January, many Chinese have watched with dismay, disbelieving that Google would quit the lucrative China market over censorship yet at the same time unhappy about being reminded of the government’s continued heavy policing of the Internet.

Numerous Chinese blogs had linked Monday to an open letter claiming to be from "China’s Netizens" to Google and the Chinese government asking to know the status of the negotiations and the sticking points. The unsigned letter was saved to Google Docs in an open source format which allows the public to freely edit it.

The letter also demands to know what specific material Google had felt uncomfortable censoring on its China site and which ministry it dealt with on censorship issues.

The China Daily’s editorial, titled "The Biggest Loser," said that Google and not China will suffer most if it goes - a good-riddance theme that ran through most of the editorials.

"Google’s curtain is falling. But in China’s progressing, booming search market of 350 million Web users, a fantastic play has just started," the English-language Global Times newspaper said. "No one can afford to miss it."

Popular Chinese blogger Wen Yunchao said the critiques were a sign that negotiations had broken down and that the government had no interest in finding a way to retain Google.cn.

He also said the opinions in the newspapers were shared by some ordinary Chinese who distrust Google’s explanation for wanting to leave.

"I don’t know the ratio but I am sure a lot of people will agree with these editorials," said Wen. "I know plenty of people who felt this way before the editorials, particularly businesspeople who questioned Google’s explanation that this was a moral decision. They believe it was because Google had business problems."

Google’s Action Angers China, Divides Web Users

Google Inc.’s partial withdrawal from the China market brought swift condemnation from the government Tuesday while leaving Chinese Web surfers to wonder whether they would be able to access a new offshore search engine site or be blocked by censors.

Google’s decision to move most of its China-based search functions to Hong Kong opened a new phase in a two-month-long fracas pitting the world’s most powerful Internet company against a government that tightly restricts the Web in the planet’s most populous market.

A few Chinese passers-by laid flowers or chocolates on the large metal "Google" sign outside the company’s office building in northern Beijing. Many Chinese felt caught in the middle, admiring Google for taking a stand against censorship but wondering whether the government might further punish the company.

"I don’t know what the Chinese government will do to Google next," said Zhou Shuguang, a well-known blogger who uses the online name "Zuola." "But I welcome the move and support Google because an uncensored search engine is something that I need."

After threatening to quit China over cyberattacks and legally required self-censorship, Google announced early Tuesday Beijing time that its Chinese search engine, google.cn, would automatically redirect queries to its service in Hong Kong, where Google is not legally required to censor searches.

The shift did not mean, however, that Chinese were suddenly allowed unfettered access to everything on the Internet. Chinese government Web filters - collectively known as the Great Firewall - automatically weed out anything considered pornographic or politically sensitive. The move, in effect, shifts the responsibility for censoring from Google to the communist government.

Beijing responded swiftly, testily declaring that Google violated commitments it made to abide by China’s censorship rules when it entered the China market in 2006.

"This is totally wrong. We're uncompromisingly opposed to the politicization of commercial issues, and express our discontent and indignation to Google for its unreasonable accusations and conducts," an official with the Internet bureau of the State Council Information Office, China's Cabinet, was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua News Agency.

The withdrawal of its search engine makes Google the latest foreign Internet company to founder in a China market that is heavily regulated and prone to particular consumer tastes. Companies such as Yahoo, eBay and Microsoft's MSN instant messaging service have never gained the traction in the China market that their homegrown rivals have.

Google's move, however, marks only a partial retreat. It's leaving behind a research and sales division. Its map services and a free, advertiser-supported music portal still have their servers in the mainland, and its Gmail e-mail service remains available too.

"It's a balancing act. They are trying to leave but not leave, stay but not stay," said Duncan Clark, managing director of BDA China Ltd., a technology market research firm.

Google's discord with the Chinese government added to souring ties between Washington and Beijing over Taiwan, Tibet and trade and others economic issues.

Playing down the friction with the Internet company and with Washington, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said China had a right to filter content deemed harmful to society and national security and Google's response should not harm wider relations with the United States.

"The Google incident is just an individual action taken by a business company, and I can't see its impact on China-U.S. relations unless someone wants to politicize that," Qin said at a routine media briefing.

Google's strategy leaves the google.com.hk search engine vulnerable to a total blockade. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which is owned by Google, are completely shut out of the mainland. The Mountain View, California, company also could see its existing operations foiled by a government unhappy about being challenged by a marquee foreign investor.

Despite reports saying a move was imminent, Google's decision caught many Chinese users by surprise. He Xinliang, an employee at an Internet security company in China's western city of Xi'an, first realized something had changed when clicked on google.cn but found himself on the Hong Kong site.

"I was more or less mentally prepared for this because it's been a hot topic for a while, but I was still just a little surprised," said He, who regularly uses Gmail, Google Docs and Google Calendar. "At least the page is still in simplified Chinese."

The Hong Kong page offers search results in the simplified Chinese characters used in mainland China in addition to the traditional characters used in the self-governed territory.

Initial post-move plans were broken to some of Google's 600 Chinese staff at a meeting held in the first-floor cafeteria of Google's Beijing office, said company spokeswoman Jessica Powell.

"We haven’t worked out all the details so we can’t ever rule out letting people go, but we very much want to avoid that," said Powell. "The sales presence to a certain degree could depend on the success of google.com.hk."

A client who stopped by to find out the status of his Google advertising account told reporters gathered outside that Google staff he had spoken with seemed nervous and confused.

"Nobody in there could give me a clear answer," said Pan Yun, manager of a Beijing real estate Web site. "I just want to know if our business can continue but they couldn’t give me an answer."

On taobao.com, a popular Chinese online retailer, at least one vendor was already selling a "GoogleBye" t-shirt for 38 yuan ($5.50). The words were tucked under an image of the Great Wall and above that in Chinese characters, it said "Long Live the People’s Republic of China."

The State Council official said the government talked to Google twice to try to resolve the standoff and suggested that China’s laws requiring Web sites to censor themselves was nonnegotiable.

"We made patient and meticulous explanations on the questions Google raised ... telling it we would still welcome its operation and development in China if it was willing to abide by Chinese laws, while it would be its own affair if it was determined to withdraw its service," the official said.

Still the decision is likely to further dismay many Internet-literate Chinese, who admired Google’s fight against censorship even though they don’t like to be reminded of the government’s heavy hand.

"I feel that people will greatly respect Google’s action," said Beijing law professor and human-rights lawyer Teng Biao. "China’s censorship of the Internet search engine results is a violation of the most basic of human rights. By doing this, Google will bring more global attention to China’s human rights situation."

Senators Form Caucus on Global Internet Freedom

A group of US senators Wednesday launched a bipartisan caucus aimed at promoting global Internet freedom, saying the Web should allow free speech and not be used by governments to crack down on dissent.

"Just as we stand against physical brutality of oppressive regimes, so too we must stand against this new digital tyranny that violates human rights and threatens all free nations," said Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas, the Republican co-chair of the caucus.

"Digital tyrants, beware. Your days are numbered," Brownback told a gathering at the US Capitol launching the group.

Senator Ted Kaufman of Delaware, the other co-chair, and a Democrat, said the group formalized work of the senators on Internet issues and followed the creation of a similar caucus in the House of Representatives.

"The power to connect and access information is a fundamental right

which we seek to protect, and the caucus establishes an additional vehicle for doing so," Kaufman said.

The announcement came two days after Google halted censorship in China, heightening tensions between Washington and Beijing and drawing more attention to the issue of Internet freedom.

Brownback said the Global Internet Freedom Caucus would address issues in China and elsewhere.

"Walls of oppression today are built out of networks and software as much as bricks and mortar," he said. "In China, Iran, and around the world, authoritarian governments censor information, suppress communication, and persecute free speech."

Other top senators in the caucus included Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, Dick Durbin of Illinois, and former Republican presidential candidate John McCain of Arizona.

"The fundamental freedom of all people to speak, associate, and develop their full potential is inextricably linked to the freedom of the Internet and all communications online," said McCain.

"But governments that deny the basic rights of their people are now building new and better means to expand their oppression into cyberspace. This caucus will help the United States to further our goal of keeping the Internet free, everywhere and for all people."

UK Police Asks Internet Cafes To Monitor Customers

Internet cafe users in the British capital may want to watch what they download. Scotland Yard is advising administrators of public Web spaces to periodically poke through their customers’ files and keep an eye out for suspicious activity.

The Metropolitan Police said Thursday that the initiative - which has been rolled out over the past weeks under the auspices of the government’s counterterrorism strategy - is aimed at reminding cafe owners that authorities are ready to hear from them if they have concerns about their Internet users.

Posters and computer desktop images emblazoned with Scotland Yard’s logo are also being distributed.

"It’s not about asking owners to spy on their customers, it’s about raising awareness," a police spokesman said, speaking anonymously in line with force policy. "We don’t ask them to pass on data for us."

Still, he said, police were "encouraging people to check on hard drives." He did not elaborate, saying it would be up to cafe owners to decide if or how to monitor what customers left on their computers.

Checking hard drives could reveal what customers were up to fairly easily under the right circumstances, according to Graham Cluley of software security company Sophos. For example, an owner could examine a browser’s Internet history or sift through the programs or documents the customer downloaded - although distinguishing which user did what might

be difficult in a busy cafe.

But Cluley noted that a computer-savvy criminal could make their activities invisible in a few simple steps.

"You would expect any cybercriminal who had made the decision to use an Internet cafe to pretty much dust off their fingerprints," he said.

Still, Cluley said "there's no harm in keeping an eye open."

While the program is voluntary - owners can ignore police advice if they so choose - civil libertarians aren't happy. One said it risked creating an atmosphere of fear while undermining Internet users' privacy.

"What you're going to end up with is a lot of people reporting Muslims in Internet cafes," said Simon Davies, the director of U.K.-based Privacy International. Although he acknowledged that people might have lower expectations of privacy in an Internet cafe than at home, he said their communications should nonetheless be kept to themselves.

"We don't expect that our calls from a public phone would be monitored, anymore than we should expect our e-mails to be monitored," he said. "As citizens we have to hold the line that there is a fundamental right of privacy of communications."

Police say Internet cafe owners should remain vigilant in part because the venues have often been used by terrorists and other criminals in an attempt to evade detection. The police spokesman noted that the men behind the plot to blow up U.S.-bound passengers jets with liquid explosives secreted into soft drink containers used an Internet cafe to coordinate their plot.

So far the only visible sign of the police's initiative were some sternly worded posters warning customers against accessing "inappropriate or offensive content" posted at Internet cafes in various areas of London. The desktop images promoted by Scotland Yard - which would have the warning staring out from every computer screen - were absent from the few north London cafes seen by The Associated Press.

In other EU nations Internet cafes generally go about their business with a minimum of official interference.

Germany's federal police agency Bundeskriminalamt has no similar program, spokeswoman Barbara Huebner said, while French Internet cafes do not generally monitor users' activity.

At a Paris Internet cafe that is part of the Cybercafe Milk chain, employees are not allowed to view what their customers are researching on the Internet.

"It's private, thankfully," said employee Pierre Larroque, 31.

Back in Britain, K. Jama of IFKA Tele.com in the Camden area of north London said his cafe couldn't be bothered to monitor its customers' downloads or Internet history - which he said were wiped from the computers every day in any case. Still, the 34-year-old said the police's posters were a useful way of deterring criminals from his shop.

"When they see the poster hanging there, they will think twice, that's the main thing," Jama said.

But Arash Assam, an 18-year-old student who was browsing Facebook in the basement of the shop - just beneath the bright purple police warning - wasn’t impressed.

"I didn’t even notice it," he said.

The Internet cafe initiative came as lawmakers criticized the government’s counterterrorism strategy. A report published by a parliamentary committee on human rights Thursday said civil liberties were all too often "squeezed out by the imperatives of national security and public safety" in the fight against terrorism.

The government said the threat to Britain from terrorists remained "real and serious."

US Senate Panel Clears Plan for Tighter Cybersecurity

A US Senate committee on Wednesday approved a bill to try to tighten cybersecurity to better protect US government agencies and businesses from Internet threats.

The text was unanimously approved and now moves to a full Senate vote.

"The status quo is not sustainable. We need a new model for the 21st century. We must secure America?s critical networks, innovation and competitiveness in the global market," committee chair and cosponsor John Rockefeller said in a statement.

The Cybersecurity Act is a new draft of a bill introduced last year and was revised to take into account the views of more cybersecurity experts in the private sector, government and civil liberties community.

The bill would not allow the president to shut down the Internet unilaterally - a revision to address critics of the prior bill who claimed it would provide that authority.

The proposal would require collaboration with the private sector in responding to a "cybersecurity emergency."

A "cybersecurity emergency" is defined as "a cyber event that is equivalent to an act of war, a terrorist attack, or a major natural disaster."

Another new provision in the bill would allow the president to provide security clearances to private sector officials to allow for the sharing of classified information.

A companion bill to the Cybersecurity Act calls for the creation of a post of National Cybersecurity Adviser at the White House which would require Senate confirmation.

President Barack Obama has cited cybersecurity as a national priority and named Howard Schmidt, a former Microsoft executive, as his cybsersecurity coordinator in December.

Prosecutors To Seek 25 Years for TJX Hacker

A computer hacker who helped orchestrate one of the largest thefts of credit and debit card numbers in U.S. history faces sentencing this week for hacking into computer systems of major retailers, including TJX Cos., BJ’s Wholesale Club and Sports Authority.

Prosecutors plan to ask for a 25-year prison sentence for Albert Gonzalez, a former federal informant from Miami who pleaded guilty last year in three separate hacking cases brought in Massachusetts, New Jersey and New ork.

The sentence sought by prosecutors is the maximum under the terms of plea agreements in cases against Gonzalez brought in Massachusetts, New Jersey and New York. He will be sentenced in all three cases during hearings Thursday and Friday in U.S. District Court.

His lawyer will argue that Gonzalez should get no more than 15 years.

Prosecutors said Gonzalez victimized millions of people and cost companies, banks and insurers nearly $200 million. They said just two of Gonzalez’s computer servers contained more than 40 million distinct credit and debit card numbers.

"The sheer extent of the human victimization caused by Gonzalez and his organization is unparalleled," Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen Heymann said in a sentencing memorandum filed in court.

Gonzalez, 28, pleaded guilty in September to hacking into the computers of TJX Cos., BJ’s Wholesale Club, OfficeMax, BostonMarket, Barnes & Noble, Sports Authority and the Dave & Busters restaurant chain.

In December, he pleaded guilty to conspiracy to gain unauthorized access to computer servers at the Maine-based supermarket chain Hannaford Brothers; the convenience store chain 7-Eleven Inc.; and Heartland Payment Systems Inc., a New Jersey-based processor of credit and debit cards.

Gonzalez’s Boston attorney, Martin Weinberg, did not immediately return calls seeking comment on his sentencing recommendation of 15 years.

Weinberg said during an earlier court hearing that he would ask for a lesser sentence based in part on a defense psychiatrist’s report that Gonzalez shows behavior consistent with Asperger’s syndrome, a form of autism. The report described Gonzalez as an Internet addict with an "idiot-savant-like genius for computers and information technology," but socially awkward.

Gonzalez, who was known online as "soupnazi," was a self-taught computer genius.

He was first arrested for hacking in 2003, but he became a government informant, helping the Secret Service find other hackers. But prosecutors said that over the next five years, he hacked into the computer systems of major retailers while continuing to be an informant for the government.

During that time, authorities said, he amassed $2.8 million and lived a

lavish lifestyle. As part of the plea deals, Gonzalez must forfeit more than $2.7 million, plus his Miami condo, car, Rolex watches and a Tiffany ring he gave to his girlfriend.

Authorities said Gonzalez and two foreign co-defendants used hacking techniques that involved "wardriving," or cruising through different areas with a laptop computer and looking for retailers' accessible wireless Internet signals. Once they located a vulnerable network, they installed "sniffer programs" that captured credit and debit card numbers as they moved through a retailer's processing computers - then tried to sell the data overseas.

Opera Gaining Ground from Microsoft Browser Ballot

Opera, a small Web browser from Norway most well-known for its mobile version widely used on smartphones, is apparently gaining some ground for browser market share. Following the launch of the Microsoft browser ballot in Europe - the result of an agreement between Microsoft and the European Commission to expand browser choice for users and end an antitrust battle - Opera is on the rise.

A press release on the Opera Web site quotes Håkon Wium Lie, CTO of Opera Software, stating "This confirms that when users are given a real choice on how they choose the most important piece of software on their computer, the browser, they will try out alternatives," adding "A multitude of browsers will make the Web more standardized and easier to browse."

Microsoft offers a total of 12 options in the browser selection ballot, including Microsoft Internet Explorer (IE), Mozilla Firefox, Apple Safari, Google Chrome, Opera, Sleipnir, Maxthon, FlashPeak Slim Browser, GreenBrowser, Avant Browser, Flock, and K-Meleon. Of course, most users are only familiar with the first five.

The Opera statement claims that downloads of Opera 10.5 have more than doubled since the introduction of the browser ballot for Windows in Europe. Broken down by country, Opera has actually more than tripled downloads in Poland, Spain, and Italy.

Microsoft has lost some ground since introducing the randomized browser selection ballot - a testament to the effectiveness of the ballot in making users aware of alternate browser options and letting them choose. One thing that is missing from these results is which browser is ultimately used the most.

Users have the choice to select a browser aside from Microsoft Internet Explorer as the default browser in Windows, and that choice may lead to increased initial downloads for alternate browsers. However, after dabbling in alternate browsers, many users may ultimately return to the top three and ultimately rely on Microsoft Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, or Google Chrome for day to day Web surfing.

To be fair - being fifth out of the top five browsers and occupying less than three percent of the overall browser market make it much simpler - and less impressive - to double or triple downloads. Double or triple of next to nothing is still next to nothing.

That said, Opera is a very capable Web browser that many users are not even

aware of. Recent tests showed that the most recent version of Opera, Opera 10.5, takes the crown for fastest. Opera blew away the competition, beating Google Chrome - which is designed from the ground up for speed - by 20 percent.

Both Opera and Chrome may see increased adoption in Germany. A few months ago, following the discovery of an Internet Explorer zero-day exploit that was used to launch attacks against Google and other companies in China, the German government recommended everyone abandon IE. Now the German government is strongly recommending everyone drop Mozilla Firefox as well in response to a recent critical security flaw.

I don't recommend following the guidance from the German government, though. All browsers will have security vulnerabilities, and IT administrators can't be expected to uninstall and switch browsers in a business environment every other month as a defense against those flaws.

Internet Explorer Loses Share in European Markets

Microsoft's delivery of a browser choice screen to European PC users this month is already beginning to have an effect on the software giant's market share within the European Union. For example, the latest statistics from StatCounter suggest that the new browser ballot is driving Internet Explorer share declines in France, the United Kingdom, Italy and elsewhere.

Mozilla's Firefox browser appears to be the major beneficiary of Microsoft's declines in France, where IE has lost 2.4 percentage points of market share since February 9. Firefox also has received small market-share bumps in Italy and the U.K.

"Early data suggests 50,000 to 100,000 new users chose Firefox as a direct result of seeing the ballot choice screen," said Mozilla spokesperson Erica Jostedt. "We expect these numbers will increase as the ballot choice rolls out in additional countries and will share updated metrics as they become available."

Opera Software said it has been experiencing a dramatic uptake on downloads of its new Opera 10.50 browser, with the increase more than doubling from normal download numbers. "The greatest gains are in countries like Poland, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Netherlands and Portugal," said Opera spokesperson Falguni Bhuta.

StatCounter's latest data also shows that browser users in France and Italy are beginning to turn to Chrome, Opera and Safari. For example, IE's market share in Italy slipped by 1.25 percentage points in the past month, even as Chrome's share rose 0.7 percent.

From a global perspective, however, the Dublin-based web-metrics firm reports that IE's market share has remained steady at about 54.5 percentage points over the past month. So Microsoft's browser losses in Europe are being offset by gains in other markets worldwide.

Microsoft previewed its forthcoming IE9 browser before MIX10 conference attendees in Las Vegas last week. The software giant clearly hopes that the release of its next-generation browser, which does not yet have a firm date, will help it maintain its dominance over the global browser

market.

On the downside, IE9 will not be compatible with machines running Windows XP, which continues to be the world’s most popular PC operating system. So the incompatibility will limit IE9’s initial uptake when it eventually comes to market.

Given that most people never change the browser that comes with their machines, the majority of IE9 users in the long run will be people who get new hardware, noted Al Hilwa, program director of applications development software at IDC.

"For the small subset who actually upgrade a browser and who will specifically upgrade to IE9, they will largely be motivated by graphics performance considerations and will unlikely be the ones running Windows XP at this late stage and less so down the road," Hilwa said.

Supporting Windows XP would not yield the performance improvements that the newer Windows operating systems will deliver through IE9 because of XP’s lack of support of Direct2D, Hilwa observed. "Thus the offering would not be so attractive in the first place without a significant chunk of what is new in IE9," he said.

Hilwa thinks Microsoft is making a fairly wise return-on-investment calculation in this instance. "It may be more important for the IE team to support the Macintosh in the long run and to invest their efforts in mobile browsers for the major smartphone platforms," he explained.

Google Protects Gmail Users with Suspicious Activity Alert

Intruder alert. Intruder alert. The new Gmail feature launched by Google won’t have any cool audio alert blaring out "intruder alert", but it will alert users when suspicious activity indicates a potential compromise of the e-mail account. Google hopes to help users combat e-mail fraud and identity theft with the new feature.

Pavni Diwanji, Engineering Director for Gmail, described the following scenario in a post on the Official Gmail Blog. "A few weeks ago, I got an email presumably from a friend stuck in London asking for some money to help him out. It turned out that the email was sent by a scammer who had hijacked my friend’s account."

Many small and medium businesses - as well as an increasing number of larger companies - rely on the Web-based Gmail as their primary messaging platform. A sharp rise in socially-engineered attacks and identity theft make Gmail account compromises a quickly growing concern.

Google has long had a security feature which displays the last login time for the account and whether or not the account is currently open in another location. That information should be sufficient for users to identify most compromises or suspicious activity, but apparently it is not overt enough and many users don’t pay attention to it.

The new Google approach monitors certain criteria and considers a range of user behaviors to try to identify activity which should raise red flags. Diwanji explains "To determine when to display this message, our automated system matches the relevant IP address, logged per the Gmail

privacy policy, to a broad geographical location. While we don’t have the capability to determine the specific location from which an account is accessed, a login appearing to come from one country and occurring a few hours after a login from another country may trigger an alert."

Diwanji summed up by reminding users to "Keep in mind that these notifications are meant to alert you of suspicious activity but are not a replacement for account security best practices."

That is sage advice - particularly for IT administrators, and small and medium businesses that rely on Gmail. The new suspicious activity alert is a nice feature, but it is not a comprehensive defense and does not enable customers to let their guard down. It is no silver bullet.

Businesses should ensure that users are aware of the new Gmail feature so they are not caught off guard if they see it. A process should be established for escalating the notification to management, or responding to suspicious activity alerts.

By developing a plan for what to do with the information, businesses can capitalize on the feature to augment existing security controls and protect Gmail accounts from fraud and identity theft.

Don t Press That F1 Button!

After a few days of head scratching, Microsoft told Windows XP users today not to press the F1 key when prompted by a Web site.

The warning is part of the software giant s emerging reaction to an unpatched vulnerability that hackers could exploit to hijack PCs that run Internet Explorer.

Microsoft is investigating new public reports of a vulnerability in VBScript that is exposed on supported versions of Microsoft Windows 2000, Windows XP, and Windows Server 2003 through the use of Internet Explorer.

But good news for Vista and Win7 users: Their investigation has shown that the vulnerability cannot be exploited on Windows 7, Windows Server 2008 R2, Windows Vista or Windows Server 2008.

The main impact of the vulnerability is remote code execution.

The vulnerability exists in the way that VBScript interacts with Windows Help files when using Internet Explorer. If a malicious Web site displayed a specially crafted dialog box and a user pressed the F1 key, arbitrary code could be executed.

On systems running Windows Server 2003, Internet Explorer Enhanced Security Configuration is enabled by default, which helps to mitigate against this issue.

Until a patch is ready, users can protect themselves by not pressing the F1 key if a Web site tells them (repeatedly) to do it.

Another workaround: Disable Windows Help by modifying the ACL on winhlp32.exe to be more restrictive on Windows 2000, Windows XP and Windows Server 2003 by running the following command from an administrative command

line:

```
echo Y | cacls "%windir%\winhlp32.exe" /E /P everyone:N
```

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